
WINDOW ON COMMUNICATION

E BOOK: THINGS THAT CAN'T BE,
TOUCHED RISK LOSING THEIR VALUE!



A lot of people don't like e-books. For them, a book is a printed volume that you leaf through while sitting under an umbrella on the beach or some other vacation spot.

Printed books occupy physical space in our homes; we take them with us if we move house; they make noise if we drop them on the ground. It is precisely because of their physical consistency, which accompanied us through the years of our formation and remains our basic point of reference, that Marshall McLuhan, the famous Canadian massmediologist, underscored that books were central to the "Gutenberg Era," that is, from the invention of printing up to the beginning of the 20th century.

Nor should we forget that religious communication has also come down to us through printed material: catechisms, the Bible and theology books have weighed down the school bags and back packs of many of us. The "E" (electronic) age has profoundly transformed learning models to the point of "dematerializing" documents, study aids and money by transferring them from place to place by means of bits. But precisely at a time in which it might seem clearer than ever that knowledge and culture are not material goods and thus can take advantage of non-material aids, we have discovered that there is more immediate satisfaction in clinging to habit and to the standard mentality rather than switching over to a new one.

I am thinking in particular about people who were trained to run book stores furnished with book shelves and catalogues, and who are used to handling orders and making packages. How can such people imagine their work as being confined to a computer screen or to a stock room, without any contact with other individuals??

E-books are too new to have made a dent in our hearts and wallets. They were officially "born" in 1971 when American author Michael S. Hart created Project Gutenberg, a volunteer effort to digitize and archive public domain books to encourage their distribution via the Internet. This fulfillment of the dream of copyleft (a method for making books freely available to the public) was a death knell to copyrights and to jobs that depend on the publishing industry.



E-books are made up of these elements: a text that is converted into the standard format for electronic publishing and a pc tablet or e-reader to read the text. In the electronic version of a book, the “place” where the text is stored is not visible to the eye—it is an immaterial space inaccessible to us.

But an e-book does not necessarily exclude its printed form. In general, those who buy e-books don’t stop buying books in their classic printed form and vice-versa. It is not only possible for e-books and printed books to live together—it is even advantageous for them to do so!

What is important is that book buyers do not fall into the disagreeable habit of thinking that an electronic book must necessarily be sold at a very low price, or else be offered free or even be pirated. Because things that can’t be touched risk losing their value!

Fr Marco Sanavio